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Interview with Kathleen Lightsey

Kathleen Lightsey
SC Mother of the Year Committee

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Winthrop University
South Carolina Mother of the Year Award Oral History Archives

Interview Transcript

Kathleen Lightsey

Dr. Disney: Good morning.

Kathleen Lightsey: Good morning.

Dr. Disney: My name is Dr. Jennifer Leigh Disney and I am honored to be here with Mrs. Kathleen Lightsey, a member of the South Carolina Mother of the Year award selection committee. Kathleen, thank you so much for giving us your time today.

Kathleen Lightsey: I'm glad to. Thank you.

Dr. Disney: Let's start by asking you when and where you were born and raised.

Kathleen Lightsey: I was born in Columbia, South Carolina and raised here. I had a very loving home; one sister. My mom and father were very active in Shandon Methodist Church here. I became an Episcopalian when I got married because my husband said he wouldn't feel married unless he was married in an Episcopal church. After we got married, I said, "Now would you like to get married again," after we started out of the church and he said, "No, no, I think I feel married." But I did join the Episcopal Church.

Dr. Disney: Is there anything you want to share with us about your family or early childhood experiences?

Kathleen Lightsey: Well, where do I start? I had a wonderful mother and father and I was very sickly as a child. They took good care of me and finally got me well and happy by the time I was about twelve, I guess. But I had a happy time, all that time. I was allergic to milk, so that's why I was sick. I wasn't healing hearty and caught all the diseases. I finally got myself well. I had a fun high school experience; I met my husband in high school. We started dating in college and got married when he finished at Clemson, but I did not finish. I was at Coker College and when I was a junior, the deal with my parents was that I would finish college. That was a big deal, or else I would have had to run off and get married. They would give me a wedding if I promised to finish college. I finished at the University of Georgia. Harry, my husband, went to the University of Georgia to study veterinary medicine. So I went with him, and when I did finish after a year, I worked as a librarian at the law school at the University of Georgia. That was my only paying experience as a working female in my whole life. I worked, but I didn't get paid for it, except with a lot of love.

Dr. Disney: So let's go back, I want to ask you, when you were at Coker College, you had already met your husband, so that may shape your answer, but when you look back at your experience, education, and young adult life, what were your goals, dreams, and aspirations at that time?

Kathleen Lightsey: My aspirations were to get married. At that point in history, or women's history, that's what women were supposed to do. They were supposed to get married and have babies and raise them all and be nice to their husband. Harry went to veterinarian school and became a veterinarian and we went to live on a farm that his father owned. It was near Allendale, South Carolina – ten miles from Allendale. It was enough in the suburbs, really in the suburbs. We went to live there and met a lot of nice, nice people around there and Allendale. There are a bunch of little towns all together – Fairfax, Varnville, Brunson – and in these small towns, they didn't have a movie theatre, so they made their own entertainment. There was garden club, bridge club, dance club, supper club – they danced a lot and had all kinds of dances. Harry and I had to come to Columbia to rest up. It was a lot of fun living there.

Dr. Disney: Well, that's good. You've already predicted my next question. Tell us about the early years of your marriage and the birth of your children.

Kathleen Lightsey: My oldest child was born as Harry finished veterinary school. He was born in April, and Harry finished in June. We went to Allendale and the name of the farm was Belfast, so we went to Belfast and had the little baby. We had another little boy the next year. Harry had always wanted to go to law school. He was sixteen when went to Clemson and his father wanted him to be a farmer and take care of his hogs and cattle. Harry was too young to say no, but the whole time he wanted to go to law school. He did what his dad wanted him to do, but his dad was a lawyer, so I don't know how that happened. Finally he grew up enough to tell his dad that he really wanted to go to law school. We came to Columbia to the University of South Carolina Law School with two little boys. I didn't work; I stayed home and took care of the two little boys. The day that Harry finished law school, I had a little girl. Harry always said, "That was the best day of my life and you upstaged me by having a little girl." I had another son later on after that. So we had a nice, complete family.

Dr. Disney: So four children total: three sons and one daughter. Do you want to tell us about them and what they're doing today?

Kathleen Lightsey: The first two went to law school. Harry, the oldest, went to Princeton because he was playing football and he could play football at Princeton. He wasn't good enough to play at Carolina. But he decided he wouldn't play football there, but he would study. He would say that if he played football, he would have terrible grades. So then he finished and came to South Carolina Law School, where Harry became a Dean while son Harry was in law school. It really kind of affected him to be the Dean's son, but he just had one more year until he got out. He went to work at a law firm in Houston, Texas. Then he got a job at Bell South, it became, because he wanted to move closer to home. He job that job and he moved to Columbia, then to Miami, and then to St. Louis, and then to Columbia again, then to Atlanta, three times in between. In all that process, he was promoted and became president of Bell South. They merged with AT&T and gave him a real good job, but it wasn't quite what he wanted to do or what he had been doing, so he investigated his retirement and at fifty-five, he retired. I felt very old. The reason he retired was because he got offered a good job in D.C., where he is now and he's with General Motors. He's in charge of what I call the bells and whistles of General Motors – cars and trucks and travel supplies. He had two children, a girl and a boy. His daughter finished at Furman and got a Master's at Boston University. She married a boy from Furman and he went to law school. Now they're in Washington, D.C., about to have a baby in September, so I'll be a great-grandmother. She works for Homeland Security and he works for a Congressman on the Hill, but

they seem very happy, which is wonderful. His son graduated from Davidson and he's in medical school at Columbia University in New York. We'll be glad to have a doctor in the family.

My second son went to Duke and graduated. Then he took a year off to decide what he wanted to do. So he decided he would go to law school, and at that time Harry was the Dean at the law school and he had this experience this with Harry. This child's name is Wallace, and he felt that if this child did anything good, they'd say, "Oh this is the Dean's son." So I told the Board of Trustees that we'd send him to the next best place, which was Harvard. He did do well. He was the associate editor of the Harvard Law Review, graduate Cum Laude. He graduated Summa Cum Laude from Duke. He's my real student. He did clerk for Warren Burger in the Supreme Court, which was a wonderful experience. There, he's a lawyer in Greenville, South Carolina. He has two children, a son and a daughter. His son is very musical and he's in a music college in Boston – it's called Berkeley and he plays jazz guitar. Wallace thought he ought to have a little backup, so he's going to get his AP degree. But he's got his first record coming out right now. Maybe he'll be Benny Goodman, or somebody, but that's hard to do. But he's happy. His daughter is in school at Warren Wilson in North Carolina near Asheville. She just loves it and it's kind of a different school. It has good academics and I think she's going to get a good education. They also have sort of a farm, where they all have to work, and they can't graduate without working. They have animals, vegetables, and fruit. They raise all of their food. She works in the Post Office, but anyway she's real happy. They also have a circus, and she does the climbing up of silk, rope, whatever it's called, and then does the gymnastics up high. It's amazing. She's very happy and wants to be a veterinarian, so maybe we'll get a veterinarian after all. Of course I think they're all real pretty and handsome.

My daughter finished at Vanderbilt Cum Laude. When she was graduating, we took her and her roommate out to supper before, and I said, "Oh, I'm so proud of you girls graduating Cum Laude," which I am. But the roommate looked at her and said, "It should've been Magna, shouldn't it?" and she said, "Well it's all up to your priorities." It's all about what your priorities are, but anyway, I think she had a good time. She got a Master's at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. in Library Science. She first worked for Strom Thurmond, but she couldn't get a job and Harry had been involved in politics a little bit. He didn't run for anything, but he had helped, so we knew Strom Thurmond and Fritz Hollings. But she couldn't get a job; she'd gone to Washington with her roommate and her roommate had a job, but she didn't. She called up crying on the telephone, and I said, "Well, go see Senator Thurmond or Senator Hollings and see if they could find you a job. Strom Thurmond made a job for her in his office – she was assistant receptionist. As he went up the ladder, she went up the ladder with him and she was the librarian for the judiciary committee in the Senate and that was a wonderful experience. She met her husband along the way and they live in Potomac, Maryland now. When the Democrats took over, Strom Thurmond lost his job, so she lost her job and went to work for a law firm. She got married and after a few years, they started having children. She woke up one day and said, "Ah! I'm 33; I want to have some children!" She wanted to have four children: she had two boys and two girls in about five years. None of them were twins. The oldest just graduated from the University of North Carolina – graduated Summa cum Laude. Now, I'm not smart, I just associate with smart people! Now he's going to the University of Virginia for law school. He's going to start this year. The second son goes to the University of Chicago; he'll be a sophomore. Her daughter is entering Notre Dame in a couple of weeks; she'll be a freshman. The fourth girl

is still in high school; she'll be a junior in high school next year. My daughter is back to work at a library in a high school in Potomac, Maryland. She's doing that, and her husband teaches English at a high school, a private high school, in that area. He writes books, so he's always writing a book. He's had two published. Anyway, that's kind of her life right now.

My youngest son – all the others and my husband were associated with law – he has blue eyes, is left handed, and is not a lawyer. He's an aerospace engineer and he's worked with NASA for a long time. He's in navigation and he went to Princeton, graduated from Princeton Cum Laude and got a job with NASA for around ten years. They sent him to college and he got his PhD at Stanford. I was really glad. They called and said they wanted to speak to him, but I told him he wasn't here, but I'd take the message. They said they just wanted to call him and tell him he got a NASA scholarship to Stanford. I told them that I'm the one they should be talking to anyway! He'd come home and say, "Nobody wants to hear what I have to say. Everybody talks about law. Nobody wants to hear what I have to do." I told him that we just can't understand what you do. Anyway, he worked on the navigation system at the space station. Then he got a job offer at the University of Texas to teach. They didn't have an aerospace department, so they hired him and he set that up. Now he's at Georgia Tech; he just moved to Georgia Tech in aerospace. He's had a good many satellites that he's made up in the air. He does all of that and in the process, he married a lawyer. He said if he could be them, he'd join them. He's teaching at Georgia Tech and he has a son, who's a sophomore at Brown and a daughter who's a senior in high school. His wife quite practicing law and is just raising the children right now. They were kind of late getting married and they had these two kids two years apart. She's spent some time raising them, but she might go back to practicing law one day.

Dr. Disney: I just have to say – you have raised four children and several grandchildren, ten grandchildren, and the litany of schools that you have just gone through are the best schools in the country. You've got children and grandchildren who went to Harvard, Princeton, Duke, Georgetown, Chicago, Stanford, Brown – how did you do it?

Kathleen Lightsey: Well, they had a smart daddy.

Dr. Disney: I bet they had a smart momma too!

Kathleen Lightsey: Well, I don't know. I live in reflective glory. I just follow them all around.

Dr. Disney: You also had a husband who held several prominent positions and you've been first lady of several of those positions. Tell us about your husband's positions and the roles that you have played in addition to raising these four children to go on to these prominent positions.

Kathleen Lightsey: We first went to the University of Georgia and that was fun. He was in veterinarian school and I was in college, so we were young and having a good time. Then we went to Allendale to the farm and it really was an old plantation. Harry's mother restored the old plantation house and I've always had a good time wherever we've gone. Then he went to law school and I had two little boys. I've always had fun. I thought we had a good time there. He graduated from law school Summa Cum Laude and it was just love. He just loved it and couldn't put the books down. Then, he practiced law. While he was in law school he worked in the Statehouse for Edgar Brown, who was a Senator from Barnwell and got involved with a lot of the politicians there. He ended up managing John West's campaign for lieutenant governor and

governor. In the process, he became chairman of the Democratic Party and at that time, there really wasn't a Republican party. But that's how we knew a lot of the politicians. John West was really nice to us and we were in the Governor's Mansion a lot. We substituted for him on a Governor's trip once to Newport, Rhode Island in one of the big mansions there that they call cottages. On the way back home on the airplane, Harry was very quiet and I asked what's wrong? He said, "Well, I don't know." I said, "Do you wish you were a Governor?" and he said, "No, I wish I were a Rockefeller."

Then he practiced law for about twenty years and during that time he taught at the law school. Then they asked him to be Dean of the law school, so he stopped practicing and went into the education business, and he loved that. His good friend Joe Berry was the chairman on the Board of Trustees at the College of Charleston. They lost their President very suddenly so they asked Harry to be the interim president until they found one. So then, they didn't find one and Harry told them they hadn't been looking. They said, "Well, we thought we had one here." So he had to resign from Carolina and go to the College of Charleston, which we loved. He always liked to give parties so we gave parties at the law school and at the College. My part was the social part, so I had a really good time. His part was the hard work part.

Dr. Disney: It's hard to balance raising four children and also being the spouse of the Dean of a law school and the wife of the President of the College of Charleston and all that entails – all the activities and events and the hosting of parties. How were you about to do all of that? How were you able to balance all of your responsibilities of work and family?

Kathleen Lightsey: Well, like I said, I just followed them all around. Harry really always was a good father. He gave good quality time to his children, but we did it together. We did the politics, and the law school, the teaching, and the practicing. He would bounce his ideas off of me and he would always involve me in everything he did, so that was a lot of fun.

Dr. Disney: It seems like you two had a real partnership.

Kathleen Lightsey: We did.

Dr. Disney: That is so essential, for women and men, to balance family and work, professional responsibilities, and have a true partnership.

Kathleen Lightsey: Cooking was a real hobby of his, so we really got into cooking for parties and decorating platters and all of that. He loved all of that. At the College, we would have breakfasts, lunches, and dinners and cocktail parties. I would have breakfasts for three or four people and then I'd have cocktail parties for 500 people. But I had a lot of help – that was a secret.

Dr. Disney: What does motherhood mean to you?

Kathleen Lightsey: Well, it means everything. I've always enjoyed being a mother and I still do. I think a mother is a wonderful thing. To be able to raise good children, it's just great to be a mother. I wrote to my granddaughter who's about to have a baby and I told her that she'll never feel as much love as she'll feel when she hold that baby in her arms for the first time. I almost cry thinking about it; thinking about all the babies.

Dr. Disney: That is so true. How did you become a member of the South Carolina Mother's Association and the selection committee for the South Carolina Mother of the Year award?

Kathleen Lightsey: They invited me to do that when Harry retired and we came back to Columbia to live. I had a lot of friends and all of my friends in the Mother's Association asked me to become a member and it has been such a rewarding job. It's been the best job I've ever had. I met all of these wonderful, wonderful women and I admire them so much. It's just been a grand experience to meet them and also the members of our committee. They are so wonderful and I never would have met a lot of them, and I know I would never have met the mothers of the year. It has been a wonderful experience.

Dr. Disney: How did your membership on this committee impact you?

Kathleen Lightsey: As I've said, it's one of the best things I have ever done. It's made me want to be a better woman and do other things because I just can't believe what some of the things these mothers did and were able to do. They had lots of children; a lot more than four.

Dr. Disney: I've been so impressed with the mothers of the year and with the selection committee members – what amazing mothers and women you all are.

Kathleen Lightsey: Well, they all are too. It's just been a grand experience and I hope we can continue a little bit, anyway.

Dr. Disney: Let me ask you a few broader questions about society. What do you think are the most important issues facing women today?

Kathleen Lightsey: Oh gosh, I don't know. Well, I feel sorry for all of the women who are not mothers and put their whole lives into their jobs and careers. I do admire them for doing that. I don't think I was ever cut out to do anything like that, but I do admire the women who have done that. I've had good friends and I respect those good friends as mothers. You always have friends through your husband and your children. It's been a good experience to watch the friends of my children grow up and do well. I don't know what the hardest or most important issue for women today.

Dr. Disney: Well certainly balance those things – work inside the home, work outside the home. That could be a challenge.

Kathleen Lightsey: Besides all of that, I have done church work and PTA and been on a lot of education boards.

Dr. Disney: That's also what I wanted to ask you. Tell us – and you've already started to do that – any other activities you want to share that you've been involved in in addition to the Mother of the Year Association.

Kathleen Lightsey: A lot of my activities were involving my husband and my children. I've always been interested in education and higher education. I just feel that that's the secret to a better society, really. I have worked on committees pertaining to that – at the high school level and college levels. It was interesting, and I don't know if I should go into this, but Harry was a lawyer during the desegregation period. I look back now at some of the films and things of those

activities and I think, “Gosh, I lived through all of that,” and it was an interesting experience. We both felt very strongly about the public schools and we should try to keep them as good as possible. All of our children went to public schools in Columbia, through high school. They had good experiences themselves; scary experiences sometimes. It was a very, very – I don’t know what the word is – involved time, with your philosophy of life, what should come of it, what people could accomplish given the chance. So many people didn’t have a book in their house to read and there were so many children who couldn’t read. I’ve just recently learned that the reason why a lot of people don’t go to the polls now and vote is because they can’t read and write. These are grown adult people, almost as old as I am. It’s just been a real joyful experience to see people come along in that respect. I know a black man now – and they weren’t all black, they were black and white – who just didn’t have books and it was just a terrible experience. I knew of a boy in high school, just recently, and he was living in a motel room with his father and his father’s girlfriend and his male cousin. He was not on drugs, but he was dealing drugs, and I thought, “What chance does this child have?” It’s just so sad that we still haven’t made the progress that we should have made. I know a friend who is very poor, but he became an electrician. His wife is a nurse. His little girl just got a full scholarship to Carolina and she was admitted to Stanford and some other schools, I think, in California. I told him she ought to go to Stanford, but he said she just doesn’t want to go away from home. I’m sure she’ll get a good education at Carolina.

Dr. Disney: You’re really speaking to several of the issues facing young women and young men today – poverty, inequality, lack of access to opportunity, lack of access to education. The positive spin of that is how education can be transformative in someone’s life when you do have that kind of access.

Kathleen Lightsey: I was sick recently and had a caretaker and she had graduated from Columbia College. She had four children and she is determined for them to get a college education. They’ve applied for and gotten small scholarships, but she’s working very hard. She has three of them out of college and one more to go. It’s very hard for her and they’ve had to give up a lot of things to get through all of this.

Dr. Disney: Is she from a two-income household or a single-parent?

Kathleen Lightsey: No, single. Her husband – another sad story, I’ve got all kinds of sad stories – was in the army and went to Afghanistan and came back with PTSD. She said he just wasn’t the person he was before and was very violent to her and her children and she just had to leave. He’s being treated by the army in the army hospital, but that’s very sad.

Dr. Disney: That’s devastating – when you give to your country that way and that’s what you bring back because of that situation of war and conflict. Imagine being a single parent and you’re working hard to get your kids through school and there’s no one else there to help you with that balance. That partnership we talked about is all on you.

Kathleen Lightsey: Some of the children that have graduated are helping her too, now. I just admire her a lot. It’s good to see children that are getting ahead.

Dr. Disney: That’s wonderful, to see the power of education.

Kathleen Lightsey: Harry still believes in higher education and he gave all he could to it. I became very involved too, along with my children and other children. I try to help as much as I can.

Dr. Disney: Let me ask you this – when you hear the word feminism, what does that word mean to you?

Kathleen Lightsey: Nothing. I mean, all women are female and I think they should use that to their advantage if they can. In my experience along the way, I've met a lot of young women who are lawyers and professors and they shouldn't try to be men, they should just enjoy being women and give that part of themselves to other people. I've heard of the glass-ceiling, but I've never experienced it with myself or people I know.

Dr. Disney: In your life, women and men have had equal opportunities to be successful and their gender hasn't impeded their success, they've never bumped up against that glass ceiling. You seem to have led a family in which women and men have had an equal opportunity to be and do whatever they want to be and do in the world and they've had the support to do that. That's a testament to you – all that your children and grandchildren have achieved. You and Harry and that foundation you provided, not just for your own kids, but for a lot of kids who have gone to the College of Charleston and all of the other institution you have been affiliated with. Your commitment to education is so wonderful, thank you.

Kathleen Lightsey: It's been a pleasure.

Dr. Disney: Do you have any questions for us or anything else you'd like to share that we have not yet hit upon?

Kathleen Lightsey: Well, I've heard great things about Winthrop. We knew the President for a while. They gave Harry an honorary degree, so we like that. We're happy that you're doing what you're doing. I think that's great.

Dr. Disney: I do love Winthrop and I'm so pleased that the South Carolina Mother of the Year archives will be at the Louise Pettus Archives and we'll have these oral histories. It's a real honor for us.

Kathleen Lightsey: My sister lives near Rock Hill now in River Hills. It's a suburb or gated community, I guess. Her granddaughter wanted to come to Winthrop because she wants to become a teacher and Winthrop's the teaching institution, I think.

Dr. Disney: We have a long history – teacher's college, women's college.

Kathleen Lightsey: My mother went to Winthrop, way back in the early 1920s when they had to wear uniforms. She said they stood up in a line and they would look and make sure all the skirts met at the same place.

Dr. Disney: That may have been the time when there was a working farm at the college, as well. To work and participate in creating what they ate.

Kathleen Lightsey: She grew up in Florence, South Carolina and it took a long time on the train to get from Florence to Rock Hill. After two years, she came back and went to Coker College

and graduated from there. Her mother lived in the wrong generation. She loved and she was a music teacher – she taught everyone voice and piano in Florence and taught in the high school there, too. In the write-up of my mother's wedding, my grandmother was the matron of honor and she played the organ. How she accomplished that, I don't know. She also had the reception of the wedding at her house. They squeezed a lot of oranges, and lemons, and so forth for punch, and it turned out to be a very cold day for July. They had to make some coffee really fast. My mother said one day, she came home from high school and her mother had them all packed up. She didn't know this ahead of time and she went to Columbia University in New York and studied. I don't know what town it's in, do you?

Dr. Disney: New York City?

Kathleen Lightsey: No, the one that's out. There's an undergraduate school, I think, that's away. But anyway, it was way back then in 1920 and she studied music all summer and then they all came back. So she took four children to New York and studied music all summer, but I don't know what they did. I hope they didn't get into any trouble.

Dr. Disney: One of the things I love about this project is the inter-generational conversations among women. As you said, thinking about our grandmothers, our mothers and what opportunities were and were not always available through the generations and how those opportunities may be expanding.

Kathleen Lightsey: My mother lived in Columbia and taught school. Her sister also lived in Columbia and had two children. One was a little boy at the time, so she had to ride the bus to her school and came back. Buddy would meet the bus every day and get her off the bus. She said he'd come up and say, "Aunt Mary, did you get your check?" and she'd tell him yes, and then he'd say, "Well, was it thirty dollars?" because that's what she got for teaching school in Columbia.

Dr. Disney: Wow, times have changed – for better or for worse and in good ways and in bad ways. Income has increased, but so have the bills. I wanted to thank you, Kathleen Lightsey, for giving us your time today and sharing your experiences with us as a member of the South Carolina Mother of the Year selection committee and as someone who has given so much to higher education through the years, through you and your husband's work, and through your children and grandchildren and all that they're giving to society as well. Thank you so much for your time, we really appreciate it.